

Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*: The latest film interpretation of Mary Shelley's novel

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10 December 2025

Frankenstein (2025) is a Gothic science fiction work, produced, written and directed by award-winning Mexican-born filmmaker Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, *Crimson Peak*, *The Shape of Water*, *Nightmare Alley*). It is based on the 1818 horror novel by English writer Mary Shelley. The film was premiered in August at the 82nd Venice Film Festival to considerable enthusiasm. It is streaming on Netflix.

Del Toro's *Frankenstein* is a visually imaginative work to some extent, with a number of urgent and disturbing sequences and an overall gravitas, but its conceptions in the end fail to rise above the relatively pedestrian and predictable. At its weakest, it may encourage an attitude toward science that has potentially harmful implications under present-day conditions.

"Frankenstein," of course, has an extensive and intensely diverse history both as a specific artistic work and a complex of imagery, with its innumerable (generally very loose!) film and television adaptations, the first coming out in 1910 (made by the Edison Studios). According to one source, an astonishing total of 433 feature films (including Mel Brooks' wonderful *Young Frankenstein*), 212 short films, 85 television series and 340 television episodes feature some version or interpretation of the "Frankenstein monster" character.

Also remarkably, Mary Shelley began writing the novel, about an ambitious scientist who gives the "spark of life" to a creature composed of various body parts and then regrets his action, when she was 18 and completed it when she was 19. The work emerged from a personal, political and artistic hothouse of extraordinary dimensions. More about that below.

Del Toro has asserted that his *Frankenstein* faithfully reproduces Shelley's novel by capturing its fundamental rhythms, philosophical outlook and dual perspectives of creator and creation, treating the book as his lifelong "Bible," while injecting it with his own psychological and other concerns.

The director emphasizes he chose not to copy Shelley's dialogue, to avoid sounding archaic, while striving to emulate her "melody" in dialogue and preserving the novel's issues of mortality, identity and the secrets of existence. He retains key moments like the Creature's (Jacob Elordi) self-discovery through interaction with a poor rural family and his begging for a mate in his image.

Although adapting to modern moods and attitudes, del Toro sees himself as Shelley's "representative in 2025," aligning his view of monsters as mirrors of human imperfection, morality and emotion with her view of Victor as a Miltonian Satan (*Paradise Lost*) or a Prometheus defying the Gods. The filmmaker highlights the novel's brutal tenderness, using neo-Gothic visuals and practical effects to try and bring forward its terror without straying into stereotypical horror territory.

Del Toro's *Frankenstein* unfolds as a double narrative (Creator's tale and Creature's tale), opening in 1857 aboard the ice-trapped Danish ship *Horisont* en route to the North Pole. A wounded Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) is rescued and recounts his tale to Captain Anderson (Lars

Mikkelsen) before the Creature intervenes with his own narrative.

Victor's mother dies giving birth to his brother William (Felix Kammerer), fueling Victor's obsession with defeating death amid cruel abuse from his prominent surgeon father (Charles Dance), also a baron. Expelled from Edinburgh for reanimating corpses (or pieces of them), Victor accepts funding from fatally ill arms merchant Heinrich Harlander (Christoph Waltz) to build a lab in an isolated tower. Victor assembles the Creature from Crimean War dead and hanged criminals, reanimating it via lightning through its lymphatic system, at first chaining and abusing it like his father did to him. He bonds briefly with William's fiancée Elizabeth (Mia Goth) before burning the lab in an effort to destroy the Creature, injuring himself in the process.

The Creature survives the blaze, aids a sightless patriarch and his family in the woods (earning the "Spirit of the Forest" moniker), learns to read, discovers his origins in the laboratory ruins and later revives after being shot by hunters (he cannot die). He demands a mate from Victor at William and Elizabeth's wedding, but Victor refuses. In the chaos, Victor accidentally kills Elizabeth. William dies calling Victor "the true monster," and the Creature carries the dying Elizabeth to a cave.

Victor pursues the Creature to the Arctic, where they reconcile as "father" and "son" after the Creature's failed suicide by dynamite.

Del Toro creates a new ending, setting forgiveness and redemption at the center of things, in place of Shelley's bleaker, unresolved conclusion. He alters relationships and characters such as Elizabeth, and chooses to root scientific interest in personal/childhood trauma rather than humanity's insatiable quest for knowledge—and yet the director insists these changes honor the essence of Shelley's narratives. This is questionable.

Del Toro is free to interpret *Frankenstein* as he likes, but the suggestion that he has established some sort of continuity with Shelley's most pressing concerns deserves to be challenged.

In fact, first of all, Mary Shelley presents a generally positive picture of scientists [then termed "natural philosophers"] and scientific inquiry.

In the novel, Victor attends the University of Ingolstadt in Bavaria. Anne Mellor, in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, points out this was one means of associating Victor with the political radicalism of her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley:

Ingolstadt was famous as the home of the Illuminati, a secret [Enlightenment-era] revolutionary society founded in 1776 by Ingolstadt's Professor of Law, Adam Weishaupt, that advocated the perfection of mankind through the overthrow of established religious and political institutions.

Victor, as narrator, explains that in Ingolstadt

natural philosophy, and particularly chemistry, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, became nearly my sole occupation. I read with ardour those works, so full of genius and discrimination, which modern inquirers have written on these subjects.

One of the professors there

smoothed for me the path of knowledge and made the most abstruse inquiries clear and facile to my apprehension. My application was at first fluctuating and uncertain; it gained strength as I proceeded and soon became so ardent and eager that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory.

This love of and fascination with knowledge is largely absent in del Toro's work. Victor's pursuit of science tends to be vengeful, bitter and violent in the new film.

Mary Shelley did convey fears about the uncontrolled or arrogant use of new technologies, and the possibility of their employment without proper consideration for their broader consequences, but that is a legitimate matter, which also finds expression in films such as *Oppenheimer*.

She urges the Enlightenment scientist not to delude himself about the scope and consequences of his activity, and insists Victor owes a moral duty to his "offspring," the sentient being he creates. Del Toro, however, shifts the main "sin" to emotional denial—the chilly, even sadistic refusal of grief and love—and focuses on cycles of trauma and dysfunctional parent-child bonds.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is fundamentally a cautionary tale about the responsibilities of scientific creation and the existential isolation of both genius and outcast.

In Shelley's book, Victor grows up in a stable, loving family and pursues reanimation out of scientific curiosity and a humane desire to conquer death. Del Toro reimagines Victor's father (renamed Leopold) as abusive and domineering, beating his son during anatomy lessons and instilling a survival-of-the-fittest worldview that Victor later echoes in his relations with the Creature.

Del Toro's Victor initially shows care for the Creature but spirals due to disgust, guilt and an inability to confront his emotions, chaining and burning the unfortunate being in a fit of rage. Unlike Shelley's Victor, who rejects his creation primarily out of aesthetic revulsion and pride, del Toro's version seems impelled to repeat his father's brutality, framing creation as an unconscious bid to heal family wounds. The wealthy patron Harlander (Christoph Waltz), funds the project out of his own fear of death from syphilis, adding external pressure that pushes Victor toward desperation.

Shelley was well aware of, and genuinely interested in, the cutting-edge experiments of her time, including galvanism and attempts to resuscitate the dead or apparently dead, and she weaves these ideas into Victor's studies. Her depiction of Victor's early excitement about "unfolding the mysteries of creation" reflects contemporary optimism that science could transform human life, showing that curiosity itself is not the problem.

The historical and intellectual setting in which Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* is a dense one. She was associated not only with Percy Shelley, an early socialist in all but name, but the troublemaking Lord Byron and other intellectuals of a radical bent.

In their essay, "Shelley and Socialism," Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling (Marx's daughter) explain that Percy Shelley "was the child of the French Revolution," but came to maturity during the period of the

furious response of the European ruling classes to the threat represented by that event:

Throughout Europe in the earlier part of this century reaction was in full swing. In England there were trials for blasphemy, trials for treason, suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, misery everywhere.

Fear of revolution pervaded the British ruling class, now facing a new menace, nascent working class revolt. The first trials of the so-called Luddites, textile workers hostile to the introduction of machinery that would destroy their conditions, occurred in 1812, leading to severe sentences, including hanging. Byron made his famous maiden speech to the House of Lords that February defending starving textile workers who smashed machinery and condemning the death penalty they faced.

As the Marx-Avelings further point out:

In June 1817, a few operatives rose in Derbyshire. A score of dragoons put down the Derbyshire insurrection, an insurrection there is reason to believe put up by a Government spy. On November 7th 1817, three men, Brandreth, Turner, Ludlam, "were drawn on hurdles to the place of execution, and were hanged and decapitated in the presence of an excited and horror-stricken crowd" (Dowden's *Life*). Against this judicial murder [Percy] Shelley's voice was lifted up, as it would be now in like case.

The Peterloo Massacre took place in August 1819, a year and a half after the publication of *Frankenstein*, during which the local military charged into a crowd of 60,000 demanding adult suffrage and reform of parliamentary representation. Eighteen people are known to have died, with between 400 and 700 injured, although the real figures are likely much higher.

Mary Shelley was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (who died after giving birth to her), the author of a history of the French Revolution and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and William Godwin, a semi-anarchist political thinker, author of the novel *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* and an associate of Tom Paine and other radicals.

Mary met Percy Shelley when she was 16 and he was 21—and married. They eloped to France, shocking contemporaries (and Godwin) by first living together unmarried. They faced immense pressures, both because of their unconventional lives and, more significantly, their subversive views.

On top of everything else, Mary knew personal tragedy, losing her first child in 1815. She also had to contend with Shelley's dalliances with other women, associated with his belief in "free love," an idea to which she also subscribed. It has been suggested that the criticism of Victor's egoism in the novel is in part directed toward Percy Shelley's own failings, although the two were obviously deeply in love.

The summer of 1816, when Mary began *Frankenstein* while living in Switzerland, was notorious for its cold, the apparent result of volcanic eruptions in Asia. The temperatures resulted in crop failures and famine across the globe, also provoking social unrest and food riots.

These are some of the "hothouse" circumstances referred to above. *The burning social questions, although they find indirect expression in the book, are strongly felt as aspects of its emotional and intellectual weight.*

Of course, it would not be possible to include all this in a film interpretation of a single, short novel. But the most serious artists would have done more to bring to bear the intellectual, political and psychological circumstances that informed the writing of *Frankenstein*.

After all, there are many Gothic novels, but very few continue to be read and appreciated. There is an urgency and commitment about Shelley's work that is unique. Why could the filmmaker not have done more to reproduce that and take the viewer through such an experience?

It is not accidental that del Toro has gone out of his way on a number of occasions to denounce Artificial Intelligence, most prominently at the Gotham Awards in late November, when he declared, "F--- AI." He did so in the context of thanking "designers, builders, make-up, wardrobe team, cinematographers, composers, editors," and presumably expressing opposition to the loss of employment. But the blanket condemnation speaks to social layers who blindly and misguidedly blame the technology, which has revolutionary implications, and avoid indicting the social system, for the jobs crisis in Hollywood and elsewhere. It is not a healthy or encouraging response.

Frankenstein's weaknesses are not unrelated to these backward comments. The film suffers from an approach that imagines by painting humanity (especially men, scientists, doctors. etc.) and society in the darkest colors one is getting to the "heart of darkness" and expressing true "radicalism." There is a laziness, a "going with the flow" in this, including in the cheaply marketable feminism that serves as a glue in the narrative. The performances are intelligent, although Isaac is encouraged too often in the direction of hysteria. Overall, the film suffers from a superficiality in regard to the questions it purports to address, although del Toro has undoubtedly devoted time and energy to his *Frankenstein*.



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